

**DESSIE RAE BURN'S CHRISTMAS AD-
VENTURE.**

Bessie Raeburn was a nice little girl,—truthful, trustful, generous and affectionate. But she was not without some little faults of her own. She was impulsive to rashness, self-willed, and given to odd little romantic fancies and secret schemes, which sometimes got her into trouble. She was an only child, and much petted and indulged in a luxurious home, having every thing which a reasonable little lady in short frocks and long curls could ask for. Yet she was not contented, having a foolish ambition to distinguish herself by doing something quite out of the ordinary line of little girls,—something that would make people stare, and say, "Wonderful!" "Surprising!" "A most extraordinary child!" She learned to read very young, and took eagerly to books of travel and adventure. She passionately longed for adventures of her own, and often planned out exploits of a most perilous character.

One Christmas eve, when Bessie was between seven and eight years of age, a wild little scheme came into her head, as she sat curled up on a sofa in the library, listening to her father, while he read an account of the poor of New York, and of the noble efforts that were being made by a few good men and women to lift them into a better life.

While mamma and servants were occupied in preparations for a large dinner-party, Bessie found opportunities for packing a little basket

with tiny tarts, apples, nuts and candies; and then she put on her pretty winter coat, trimmed with fur, and her new velvet hat, with a long scarlet plume. Then she took from her drawer a dainty *porte monnaie*, well filled with bright new pennies and small silver coin, and containing a compartment lined with crimson satin, wherein two gold dollars dwelt together in state, like a Mongolian king and queen. Then taking her basket on her arm, and thrusting her hands into her muff, she made her escape from the house.

Mr. Raeburn lived in the aristocratic part of the city of New York, and Bessie, thinking that she could not there carry out her plan in a satisfactory manner, hailed a down-town omnibus. Driver and passengers looked surprised to see a child taking a trip all alone, but they supposed that all must be right. After a long, long ride she alighted, somewhere in the neighborhood of the least respectable part of the city. I may as well tell you now, if you haven't guessed it, Bessie was bound on a charitable visit to the miserably poor, of whom she had heard her father read. She anxiously looked around her for a beggar child, who should act as her guide to some home of unmerited misfortune, where virtuous poverty pined, and wept, and waited. Alas! there were plenty of little mendicants on the streets that day, but Bessie was not easily satisfied. "It must be a little girl," she said to herself, "very, very poor, pale, and thin, and ragged, and sorrowful, but still pretty and mild-looking. And she must have a pretty name, too, like the little girls that beg in magazine stories, or sell matches, and are stolen by gypsies, and sing ballads for dreadful organ-grinders, and all that." Finally, she was accosted by a little girl, who looked wretched enough, to be sure,—tattered, and sickly, and starved. She was not quite up to the mark as to prettiness, though she had soft, sorrowful eyes and a delicate mouth. Hunger, cold, and ill-treatment are not very favorable to beauty. Then the name she gave was decidedly unromantic,—*Molly Magee*. But the child told a piteous story, which brought tears to Bessie's gentle eyes.—how her father was dead of fever, and her mother a suffering invalid; how she was obliged to beg in the streets from morning till night, to obtain food for that poor, dear mother, three darling little brothers, and two sisters, twins and *blind*! Bessie offered at once to go home with her petitioner, to see what she could do towards alleviating the family distress. The little mendicant hesitated at first, and attempted to dissuade her; but at last, as Bessie insisted on her own plan of benevolence, she yielded, and rather sullenly led the way. Ah, what a way it was! down one dirty street and up another, through vile courts, and alleys reeking with filth, swarming with idle, loud-voiced men, wretched-looking women, slatternly girls, and forlorn children. Bessie's heart grew sick, and her courage failed her. If she had known the way back, she would gladly have made a retreat!

The guide at last conducted her down a flight of slippery steps, leading to the basement of a squalid old tenement-house, in the five stories of which many families were packed, layer on layer, and Bessie found herself in the very bosom of the distressed family of her humble little friend. This home of virtuous poverty was not exactly what she looked for. It was darker, dirtier, more confused and noisy; it smelt worse. There were the "three darling little brothers," to be sure, and they were satisfactorily ragged. But Bessie looked in vain for the twin-sisters, whose blindness had so engaged her sympathies. But she said to herself, "Perhaps they, too, have gone out begging, with a pair of twin dogs to lead them." The invalid mother was surely on the mend, for she seemed quite stout, and her face was flushed, though that might be from fever. She sat by an old stove, smoking a short, black pipe.

"Well, Molly, what have you brought us?" exclaimed this interesting invalid, in a voice by no means agreeable.

"I haven't got any thing," was the reply; "but here's a rich little miss as says she has got something for us; she *would* come herself, instead of giving it to me."

The woman took her pipe from her lips, and—fixing a pair of hard, hungry eyes upon Bessie, as she stood smiling kindly, with her basket on her arm, like a dear little Red Ridinghood—broke out with, "And what put it into the head of such a fine lady to come near the likes of us the day?"

"I wanted to see how poor people live," replied Bessie, honestly, "and I have brought you something for Christmas," she continued, stepping up a little timidly and offering her basket.

The woman caught it eagerly, and turned its contents in her lap. "And is this all?" she growled. Pretty dinner, *indeed*, for a starving family,—nuts, candies and the like! No bread, nor the last taste of butter or *milk*."

"O, I thought you would have such common things," said Bessie, "but I have some money to buy them with."

At this, a tall figure sprang up from a heap of rags in a dark corner, and came forward,—a very dirty, disreputable-looking man. Bessie, who had taken him for a sick man, was surprised to see that he also had a fine color in his cheeks, and even in his nose, but she noticed that he seemed very weak in his legs.

"Hello! my little angel," he cried, "give me the money," and rudely caught the *porte monnaie* from Bessie's hand.

His right to it was disputed by the woman, and they quarrelled over pennies, dimes, and dollars, as "the three darling little brothers" quarrelled over apples, nuts and candies.

"Who is that man?" asked Bessie, beginning to be frightened.

"It's father," replied Molly.

"Why, you told me your father was dead. What makes you tell such stories?" exclaimed Bessie, greatly shocked.

"*She* makes me," said Molly. "Maybe you would tell stories rather than be beaten half to death."

At last the man, having secured the lion's share of the money, snatched up an old hat and staggered towards the door. He stopped a moment beside Bessie, saying, "I'm obliged to you, darling; this will get me something good for Christmas."

"Some new clothes?" asked Bessie.

"No, Miss; something better nor clothes."

"Food?"

"No; something better nor food."

As he held a big bottle in his hand, Bessie next suggested, "Medicine?"

"Why, bless your swate sowl, do I look like a sick man?"

"No, sir; but I thought you walked as though something was the matter with your legs."

Patrick Magee gave a loud, foolish laugh, as he stumbled up the slippery steps, and reeled down the dirty alley. When he was gone, Bessie proposed to take leave of her pensioners, saying,

"I must go home now, or I shall miss my dinner, and they will be troubled about me. Will you show me as far as Broadway, Molly?"

"Not so fast, if you please, miss," said Mrs. Magee. "You have *seen* how poor-people live, now I want you to *feel* how they are clad, this biting weather. Take off your fine clothes, just, and change with Molly there."

"O, please, madam, I would rather go home," cried Bessie; "do let me go! Mamma has often said that if I could be poor for one hour, ever, I would know better how to pity the poor; but I really think I have *seen* enough to-day. I am very sorry for you, indeed. I'll ask papa to help you, and give you all you want; only let me go home."

"So you shall, my pretty bird, but you must drop your fine feathers first. Off with them. And, Molly, take off all them lovely holiday clothes of yours. Sure, exchange is no robbery."

Poor Bessie saw it was vain to resist, plead or cry. In a very short time, she found herself divested of every article of her nice, warm apparel, and clad in the dirty, coarse, tattered street clothes of Molly Magee.

To do the beggar child justice, she seemed shocked at the outrage, and pleaded for Bessie as long as she dared. But Bridget Magee, a bad-tempered woman, at the best, had been drinking bad whiskey all the morning, and the brutal rage of drunkenness blazed in her hard, black eyes. When the change was completed, Mistress Bridget whispered for a minute or two to the eldest of the three little boys, and then, turning to her victim, said, with a horrible laugh:

"There, now, follow where Larry will *lade* ye. Be off wid ye! I'm thinking ye know a little more about poor folk than ye did a bit ago, when ye came prancing into a *dacent* house to show off yer grand airs and yer finery. It's an adventure as will be good for yer proud young stomach, miss."

As Bessie, too much frightened and shocked to speak, was hastening out after Larry, Molly sprang forward, caught her hand, kissed it, and sobbed out:

"O, forgive me! I didn't think they would treat you so, or I wouldn't have let you come!"

The next instant the poor girl was dashed backwards by a sudden blow from her mother's heavy hand, and Bessie saw her no more.

Master Larry Magee, a sharp-eyed and fleet-footed little vagabond, hurried Bessie off in a different direction from that in which she had come, and by many different ways; for his object was to confuse her, so that it would be impossible for her to act as a guide to the den of thieves in which she had been robbed. There was little danger!

At first, in her joy at having escaped alive from that dreadful ogress, Bessie was hardly sensible of the cold; but at length it pierced through her thin and ragged garments, and struck chills to her very heart. It seemed to clutch at her bare throat, and to snip her ears, under the old cotton handkerchief which covered her head. Her hands, muffled and gloveless, grew stiff, and the rosy tips of her fingers changed to a dismal purple; while her poor little toes, peering through great holes in shoes and stockings, looked as piteous as little baby birds, left unbrooded to the storm in dilapidated nests.

After a long, bewildering walk, or rather, run, the two children reached a wide, respectable-looking street, when they came suddenly upon a policeman, at sight of whom Master Larry executed a brilliant retreat down a dark alley. But Bessie, who in her innocence believed in a policeman as a sort of street guardian angel, went confidently up to this one,—the star on his breast shining as the star of hope to her,—related to him her wonderful Christmas adventure, and begged him to conduct her home. To her surprise and grief he refused to believe a word of the story, but taking her for the little vagrant she seemed, gruffly ordered her to "move on," adding, "You can't gammon me; I've heard too many such yarns."

With her feelings a good deal hurt, and her feet benumbed with cold, poor Bessie tottered on, she knew not whither. Happily, at the very next corner she encountered another policeman—a cheery, kindly, family-looking man. To him Bessie sobbed out her piteous story; and he, having a little girl of his own at home, was touched by her distress, and looking into the clear depths of her blue eyes, believed her. Immediately calling a cab, he put her in and got in himself, and taking off his warm blue overcoat, wrapped her in it, which was the street guardian angel's way of brooding; and so they went away up town, to a large brown stone house, on Madison Avenue—Bessie's home—where they found everybody in great distress. Papa and mamma were almost wild with anxiety; for Bessie had been gone four long hours, and a dozen police officers were already searching for her, and street criers were tramping up and down, ringing bells, and shouting, dismally,

"A child l-o-s-t!"

Mr. and Mrs. Raeburn with difficulty recognized their daughter in her ragged disguise. They were shocked by her appearance, fearing she might be made ill by the exposure, and pained and indignant at hearing all she had suffered; but they both said it would prove a good experience, if it should teach her to be less venturesome and self-assured. They hoped, they said, it would cure her of forming secret schemes, even of benevolence, and of an unchildlike ambition to act in matters of importance, independent of the aid and advice of her parents. "It did all this, I believe."